

Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200–1991

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1 From the archaeology of mind to the archaeology of matter

Static societies, changeless races

As K. Sivaramakrishnan recently pointed out, one of the persistent ironies of postcoloniality 'has been the way elites assuming the task of building a national culture and providing it with a liberatory/progressive history have turned to modes of knowledge and reconstruction produced in the colonial period'. And of the varied strands that have constituted the twentieth-century colonial and postcolonial knowledge of India, none is more central than the notion of the timeless, conservative caste, and its antediluvian ancestor, the unchanging primitive tribe.¹ The Asians, being a non-progressive people, did not change – they merely accumulated, with the latest addition to the population overlying its predecessor, much as geological strata did. The missionary ethnographer John Wilson was one of the earliest proponents of this idea, suggesting in 1854 that conquered indigenous tribes were incorporated into 'Aryan' society as lower castes.² Elsewhere, he wrote that the 'Depressed Aboriginal Tribes' were 'evidently the remains of nationalities subdued and long grievously oppressed and abhorred by those who have been their conquerors, and have held themselves in every respect to be their superiors. I refer to such tribes as the Dheds of Gujarat, the Mahars or Parvaris and Mangs of the Maratha country and the Bedars of the Southern Maratha Country.'³ He then went on to make a laboured and unconvincing effort to trace the Dheds to the Daradas and to make the Mahars the source of the regional name Maharashtra.

¹ K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'Unpacking Colonial Discourse: Notes on Using the Anthropology of Tribal India for an Ethnography of the State', *Yale Graduate Journal of Anthropology*, 5 (1993), 57; also Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 65, 69–71.

² John Wilson, 'Exposure of Hindu Caste', *The Oriental Christian Spectator* (January 1854).

³ John Wilson, *Aboriginal Tribes of the Bombay Presidency: A Fragment* (Bombay Government Press, 1876), pp. 21–2.

Equally, it was not merely continuity of nomenclature, but substantial continuity of racial descent that he was seeking to establish, in order to conclude that it was principally this 'antipathy of race, then, which we see existing between the Brahmans and their Kunbi supporters on the one hand, and the degraded Dheds, Mahars, Mangs and Bedars on the other ...'⁴

Similarly, the central Indian mountains were viewed by Charles Grant as having been a 'great natural fastness' for the aboriginal tribes, who retreated there under the impact of 'more powerful and highly organised races'. The Gond kingdoms of Deogarh and Chanda were created by a brief revanche of the aborigines, but (Grant continues)

they were as little fitted to cope with men of Aryan descent in peace as in war; and though slow centuries of enervation under an Indian sky had relaxed the northern vigour of the races to whom they had once before succumbed, yet in every quality and attainment which can give one people superiority over another, there was probably as much difference between Hindus and Gonds as there is now between Anglo-Americans and Red Indians, or between Englishmen and New Zealanders ... Those of the aborigines who remained were absorbed, though never so completely as to attain equality with the people who had overrun them. They form at present the lowest stratum of the Hindu social system, allowed to take rank above none but the most despised outcastes.⁵

Geology, biology and society in the nineteenth century

This attempt at understanding social classification in terms of races of descent was a central element in mid nineteenth-century science, predating the publication of *The Origin of Species* and the formulation of social Darwinism.⁶ As the development of geology and the sciences undermined the authority of the Church, and political and social change appeared to be destabilising Western societies, the concept of race was invoked to support threatened hierarchies, both in colonies and metropolises.⁷ Of course, the idea of superior descent from ancient conquerors had long been used in explaining human hierarchies – both Locke at the close of the seventeenth century, and Sieyès at the end of the eighteenth

⁴ See his comment that 'their physiognomy evidently marks them as of Cushite origin ... In considering them to be of Scythian or Turanian or Hamitic origin, I am not doing violence to the father of Grecian history; for it is evident that among the Scythian nations mentioned by Herodotus there must have been tribes of Hamitic as well as Japhetan descent' (ibid., p. 22).

⁵ Charles Grant (ed.), *Gazetteer of the Central Provinces of India* (Nagpur: Central Provinces Government, 1870; repr. Delhi: Usha Publications, 1984), p. xiv.

⁶ Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960* (Hamden CT: Archon Books, 1982).

⁷ See M. Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1968), ch. 4.

had occasion to rebut it. However, the thinkers they attacked essentially argued for the inheritance of privilege along lines of patrilineal descent, with little significance attached to maternal ‘blood’. Consequently the concept was still something akin to the transmission of paternal traits or patrimonial properties – not an inherent superiority inscribed in the bodily constitution of the favoured races of man.⁸ The term ‘race’ itself was freely used as late as 1850 to mean patrilineage or descent group.⁹ It was therefore freer from anxieties about miscegenation and dilution of the blood, so characteristic of later racial theory.

However, the rising tides of liberalism and socialism in the mid nineteenth century could not be effectively combated by the weakened forces of religious orthodoxy, and the new forces of science had to be invoked against them. So in 1848 – the springtime of the peoples and the seedtime of the racists – the very first issue of *The Ethnological Journal* announced that there

never was a period in the history of the world, in which a true knowledge of human nature was so indispensable to human welfare, as it is at the present day ... The grand and fundamental idea of all modern changes is the natural equality of men ... In the name of science, we assert that the idea is *false*.¹⁰

The major threat to Christian orthodoxy by the 1830s was the developing science of geology, which, especially after the publication of Lyell’s *Principles*, undermined the Biblical account of creation. The proponents of racial anthropology hoped that their enterprise would similarly establish itself as a science of man, and thus destroy the Biblical orthodoxy regarding the common descent of all humans and its unfortunate corollary of equality among them. Thus John Hunt, President of the Anthropological Society, wrote in the first volume of the Society’s *Transactions* that if

any plea were wanting for founding this society, I would ask you to look at the different degrees of progress which the sciences of Geology and Anthropology have made during the last fifty years ... Geology has within a few years become a great science and the most ignorant or superstitious dare not assail her conclusions.¹¹

⁸ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 384–98; Leon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 28–30.

⁹ John Locke: ‘Since if God give any thing to a man and his *Issue* in general, the claim cannot be to any one of that *Issue* in particular, every one that is of his Race will have an equal Right’ (*Two Treatises*, p. 259). Horace Walpole wrote in the mid eighteenth century of the Cavendish family ‘the talents of the race had never borne any proportion to their other advantages’. Horace Walpole. *Memoirs and Portraits* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1963), p. 154.

¹⁰ Anon., *The Ethnological Journal* (June 1848), 28–9. Emphasis original.

¹¹ *Transactions of the Anthropological Society of London*, 1 (1863), 7.

Evidently successful scientific enterprises always see borrowing (not always productively) of their concepts and principles, and stratification and uniformitarianism both had an obvious appeal to conservatives struggling with revolutionaries in a period when the gradualism (uniformitarianism) of Lyell's *Principles* appeared to refute Cuvier's *Discourse on the Revolutions*.¹²

The idea soon travelled to the colonial world, where geological inquiry had become a major interest of aspirant scholars, and the idea that the most-recently added stratum was intrinsically superior to the others was bound to have considerable appeal to the newly arrived colonisers. We find this analogy enunciated as early as 1865, in a digression in a *Report on the Diet of Prisoners*:

The ethnology of this part of the Dekhan has a great resemblance to its geology. First of all, and older than all, are the remnants of tribes that originally peopled the continent of India ... we may justly liken them to the granite rocks that underlie the trap, and crop out here and there from beneath the overlying strata.¹³

This metaphor became a central part of the anthropological paradigm that took shape through the later nineteenth century: so much so that a leading American scholar could write in 1900:

It is a trite observation that all over Europe population has been laid down in different strata more or less horizontal ... despite their apparent homogeneity, on analysis we may still read the history of these western nations by the aid of natural science from the purely physical characteristics of their people alone.¹⁴

The underlying notion that the 'rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate' were ordered, if not by God, then by ancient racial difference, was more explicit in a study by the leading English anthropologist John Beddoe, which concluded optimistically in 1883 that there

has been as yet nothing like a complete amalgamation in blood of the upper, middle and lower classes.

The class of small landowners and yeomen still, to some extent represents in blood, the Saxon freemen of the 11th century.

¹² C. Lyell, *Principles of Geology* (1831; I refer to the 9th edition, London: John Murray, 1851); G. Cuvier, *A Discourse on the Revolutions of the Surface of the Globe* (London: Whittaker, Treacher & Arnot, 1829). This idea was suggested by Stephen Jay Gould's essay 'Uniformity and Catastrophe' in Gould, *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History* (London: Burnett Books 1978), pp. 147–52.

¹³ Cited in F. Bruce Robinson, 'Adaptation to Colonial Rule by the "Wild Tribes" of the Bombay Deccan 1818–1880' PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 1978, pp. 9–10.

¹⁴ William Z. Ripley, *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study* (London: Kegan Paul, 1900), p. 15.

The social agenda behind the scientific project becomes clearer when we look at papers published in the early twentieth century, when pessimism about race decline had seized the upper classes on both sides of the Atlantic. Beddoe then concluded a paper on ‘Colour and Race’ with the lament

I regret the diminution of the old blond lympho-sanguine stock which has hitherto served England well in many ways, but is apparently doomed to give way to a darker and more mobile type, *largely the offspring of the proletariat* . . .¹⁵

It is easy to see how these ideas would have considerable resonance in colonial India, where they could build on the type of ethnographic thought illustrated at the beginning of this section. If the missionaries sought to dig out overlaid strata in the hope of finding them uncontaminated by the Hinduism that so tenaciously resisted the Gospel, the anthropologists were drawn to the hope of finding the authentic, primitive proof of their theories, uncomplicated by the processes of ‘metissage’ and ‘miscegenation’ that obscured the picture in other parts of the world. Indeed, H. H. Risley advertised India as an ethnographers’ paradise on precisely such grounds: the caste system had prevented mixing, and the primitive tribes were not dying out as a consequence of western contact, and could readily be lined up at official behest to have their heads or noses measured by the visiting ethnographer. Of course, this method of required the scholar to subscribe to the myth of the caste as a closed breeding population from time immemorial – or at any rate since its first establishment by the hypothetical Aryans thousands of years ago.¹⁶ It was only a small step from there to identify all impulses to change in South Asia as having an Aryan origin – the first wave of Aryans being the composers of the Veda, whose *mission civilisatrice* would be completed by their British cousins. The influential scholar-official Henry Maine declared:

The truth is that all immigrations into India after the original Aryan immigration, and all conquest before the English conquest, including not only that of

¹⁵ John Beddoe, ‘Colour and Race’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 35 (1905), 237 emphasis added; for the USA, see William Z. Ripley ‘The European Population of the United States’, in the same journal, vol. 38 (1908).

¹⁶ This despite the attempt of the leading French anthropologist, Paul Topinard to squash the idea; after a lengthy review of Risley’s materials, he concluded that ‘in the regions measured by M. Risley, India is far from being that country dreamt of by anthropologists where the distinct types display themselves, simple and classic, replicating those which legends and a history going back 4000 years and more allow us to glimpse.’ The populations were, despite the effects of endogamy, far too mixed and confused for this. The research strategy that he proposed was the eminently scientific one of confining measurement to selected individuals from the most characteristic populations – which is to say, adjusting measurement to confirm any and every theory! Paul Topinard, ‘L’Anthropologie du Bengale’, *L’Anthropologie*, 3 (1892), 310, 314.

Alexander, but those of the Mussulmans, affected the people far more superficially than is assumed in current opinions.¹⁷

Similarly, Bartle Frere, a colonial official in both India and Africa suggested in 1882 that '[t]here is much to justify the conjecture that each caste marks a separate conquest of some aboriginal tribe, each tribe having had its separate work assigned to it in the organisation of the village community'. Those who were unconquered dwelt unimproved in the hills and forests 'till the European Aryan with his roads and railroads, his uniform codes and his centralised administration broke into the aboriginal reserve of the Warlis and Bhils, of Sonthals or Gonds or Koles, and in half a generation effected more change than Hindu Rajas or Moslem Nawabs had effected for centuries before him'.¹⁸ The two-wave Aryan theory also carried the comforting connotation that the late-coming Aryans could look forward to as long a period of dominance over the lesser breeds without the law as their prehistoric ancestors had enjoyed.

Indigenous prejudice and colonial knowledge

Nor was this new theory wholly uncongenial to the indigenous elite in colonial India. Claims of immigration from the core areas of Islam or Hinduism were an essential element in the construction of a high-status identity, and genealogical fictions have an evident affinity to racial ones (especially as race originally meant descent group or lineage). Participation in the process of gathering colonial knowledge might also be seen as an opportunity to enhance one's own status in that system. Not surprisingly we find an Indian, 'Professor Tagore' informing the Anthropological Society in 1863 that 'the aborigines of India were cannibals, and that the eating of human flesh was a religious ceremony among the present Hindus'.¹⁹ Another member of the Calcutta intelligentsia, Rajendralal Mitra, contributed to the Proceedings of the Anthropological Society as early as 1869, and Risley noted the alacrity with which his anthropometric exercises were assisted by various 'native gentlemen'

¹⁷ H. S. Maine *Village Communities in the East and West* (3rd edn, New York: Holt, 1889), p. 212.

¹⁸ H. Bartle Frere, 'On the Laws Affecting the Relations between Civilized and Savage Life, as Bearing on the Dealings of Colonists with Aborigines', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, 11 (1882), 315, 317. Interestingly enough, in the discussion that followed Francis Galton challenged the whole concept of the stability of racial characteristics through time by defining them as 'the average of the characteristics of all the persons who were supposed to belong to the race, and this average was continually varying' (ibid., pp. 352–3). But unlike his eugenic prognostications, this idea did not cater to existing social prejudice, and hence passed unnoticed.

¹⁹ *Transactions of the Anthropological Society of London*, 1 (1863), 186.

in eastern India. Risley reciprocated by establishing via the highly scientific nasal index that the caste hierarchy was based on measurable indices of racial difference, and that the upper castes of Bengal were definitely 'Aryan'. If their heads were inconveniently brachycephalic, then they had derived this trait from the Indo-Burmese, but definitely not from the 'black races' of central and southern India.²⁰ Anthropometrically identical traits – dolichocephaly, for example – could be assigned to Aryan or non-Aryan racial origins, depending on the contemporary caste status of the group, so that no measurement could ever disprove the theory.²¹ An example of how the elites of north India adopted – and adapted – Risley appeared in a north Indian periodical, the *Oudh Akhbar* in 1890; Risley's measurements apparently revealed

the existence of different races of men in Bengal, namely the Aryan and the aboriginal. The former is represented by the Brahmans, Rajputs and Sikhs. These generally have tall forms, light complexion and fine noses, and are in general appearance superior to the middle class of Europeans. The Kols are a specimen of the latter. They have short stature, dark complexion and snub noses, and approach the African blacks in appearance ... the higher [a man's] origin, the more he resembles the Europeans in appearance.²²

Racial ethnography was thus being appropriated by the indigenous elites to justify indigenous hierarchy on the one hand, and to assert parity with the European upper classes, on the other. When Risley and his associates were able to sell the policy-making value of ethnography to the Government of India, and to give the Census of 1901 a definite ethnographic slant,²³ this in turn contributed much to assertions and claims of status by various groups in Indian society, the upper strata of which took enthusiastically to racism, and the academic study of 'raciology'.²⁴

So, for example, Anantha Krishna Iyer, first Reader in Ethnography at Calcutta University in 1925 connected the 'Dravidians' with the Africans, Melanesians and Australians:

Their spoor [*sic!*] may be everywhere followed from the flat-faced curl-haired Koch of Assam with thick protuberant lips of the Negro to the dark and irregularly featured Nepalese, to the Santhals of Chota Nagpur as also the low-caste hillmen of Southern India. They might justly be regarded as the

²⁰ Risley, 'Ethnology in India', pp. 255–6.

²¹ See *ibid.*, p. 256 for an example.

²² Cited in Khondkar Fuzlee Rubbee, *On the Origins of the Mussalmans of Bengal*, p. 48 first published 1895; repr. in *Journal of the East Pakistan History Association*, 1, 1 (1968).

²³ See the correspondence in D. Natarajan (ed.), *Indian Census Through a Hundred Years*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Office of the Registrar-General, nd), II, pp. 545–51.

²⁴ See, for example, 'Indian Physical Anthropology and Raciology: Ramaprasad Chanda's Contribution', *Science and Culture*, 8 (Nov. 1942).

unimproved descendants of the manufacturers of the stone implements found in the Damodar coal-fields.

The new 'science' of course, confirmed the old hierarchy in his home region, Kerala: 'we find Negroid features in the types among the hillmen and the agrestic serfs, and Dravidian features among the people of the plains, and fine Aryan characteristics among the people of the higher castes ...'²⁵

Now, if the Saiyads, Brahmans, Kayasthas, Bhumihars, Nambuthiris etc. were the penultimate stratum of the racial hierarchy, with only the more aristocratic of the British Aryans above them, the lowest castes, and even more, the forest dwellers had to be the oldest and lowest stratum. This identification once again played into the current prejudices of the indigenous elites regarding the forest and its inhabitants, and could be integrated as easily into their beliefs as racial theories could.²⁶ To be linked with the wilderness, the jungle, was by definition pejorative from ancient times down to the nineteenth century: so, for example, the Marathas in Malwa showed their contempt for their Rajput subjects by deconstructing the regional name *Rangadi* to mean *Ran* + *gadi* or jungle + servant, thus capturing two inferior statuses in a single spurious etymology.²⁷ Forest folk (*jangli*) were the definitive others against whom civilised folk measured themselves. A century later, the Dutch anthropologist Breman observed that the hilly tract of eastern Gujarat was inappropriately described as 'jungle': 'the pejorative characterisation is intended to emphasise the backwardness of the area and its population.'²⁸ Equally illustrative of these attitudes were the widespread legends that claimed that the founders of ruling chiefdoms had all won their power by conquering or expelling wild folk, Bhils, Bhars, Cheros and others. The nineteenth-century legends often identified some local caste of pig-breeders as the descendants of the conquered autochthones.²⁹ It is a moot point why this motif was so widespread among claimants to landholding status in the early nineteenth century –

²⁵ L. K. A. Krishna Iyer, *Lectures on Ethnography* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1925), pp. 49–51.

²⁶ A point still valid today; see, for example, Schendel, 'The Invention of "Jummas"' pp. 102–3.

²⁷ Reported in the early nineteenth century by John Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India including Malwa*, 2 vols. (1823; repr. Delhi: Sagar Publications, 1970), II, p. 191.

²⁸ Jan Breman, *Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers: Rural Labour Circulation and Capitalist Production in West India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 196.

²⁹ For the Bhils, see Malcolm, *Memoir of Central India*, I, pp. 519–23; Bhars and Cheros figure in most nineteenth-century accounts of the historical traditions of North India; see, for example H. M. Elliott, *Memoirs on the History, Folk-Lore and Distribution of the Races of the North-Western Provinces*, ed. and rev. John Beames (London: Trubner, 1869), pp. 33–4, 59–62.

but it might be suggested that the legend of conquest was necessary to an affirmation of warrior status for the landlords. The frequent identification of very low castes as the former owners was probably intended to convey the utter impossibility of a revival of their claims to the land, since these groups were typically retained as village drudges, excluded from cultivation and land control. The fact that their testimony was preferred in cases of boundary disputes may be seen as evidence not of their autochthonous nature, but of their total exclusion from land-holding, which would make them more impartial than the other villagers on this matter. Such legends were grist to the mill of the speculative ethnographer-historians of the later nineteenth century, who read them naively as depictions of the past instead of as claims in the present. The relatively small number of the alleged autochthones fitted well with the widespread Western belief that such ‘lower races’ were fated to die out in the presence of superior specimens of mankind.³⁰ When, however, the four or five centuries preceding the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate were studied on the basis of contemporary epigraphs and other records, no trace of the Bhar chiefs, the Tharu gentry or the Bhil kinglets could be found in the areas where nineteenth-century traditions would have placed them; instead we find various dynasties all making claims to aristocratic origin no less strident than those made a millennium later.³¹

The euhemeristic reading of fables continued undeterred. So the Vedic and Pauranic depictions of demons and ogres were read as exercises in physical anthropology by at least one Reader – Alfred Haddon, University Reader in Ethnology at Cambridge, who declared in 1910 that it was ‘hardly an exaggeration to say that from these sources there might be compiled a fairly accurate anthropological definition of the jungle tribes today’.³² Nor was he unique in this – Topinard (evidently on the basis of some garbled echo of the Ramayana) identified the first race to inhabit India as a short black people, ‘similar to

³⁰ Enunciated by many scholars, including Alfred Wallace, *Anthropological Review*, 5 (1867), 103–5; A. L. F. Pitt-Rivers, *The Evolution of Culture and Other Essays*, ed. J. L. Myers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), p. 54; and Charles Lyell. The last-named wrote in 1853: ‘few future events are more certain than the speedy extermination of the Indians of North America and the savages of New Holland in the course of a few centuries . . .’ (*Principles of Geology*, p. 700).

³¹ See R. C. Majumdar (ed.), *The History and Culture of the Indian People Vol. IV: The Age of Imperial Kanauj* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1951) chs. 1–3, 5 for the details.

³² A. C. Haddon, *A History of Anthropology* (New York: Putnam, 1910), pp. 9–10. Eighty years later the same euhemeristic reading appears in S. Wolpert, *A New History of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 40–1. All that is needed to complete the research would be the discovery that Ravana was a Siamese dectuplet, and Kumbhakarna a sufferer from sleeping sickness.

monkeys'.³³ So indigenous alterity and western anxiety combined to create a stereotype of the forest folk that was to have a powerful effect on society and politics in India down to the present. A masterful, if polemical picture of the British census classifications and the resulting contradictions and confusions was given by G. S. Ghurye fifty years ago.³⁴ But the archetype once formed outlasted the colonial regime and the racial anthropology that had generated it, and remains a powerful identity in late twentieth-century India.

We may take as an example the work of V. Raghaviah, office-bearer of the Bharatiya Adeemjati Sevak Sangh, or (to translate literally) the Indian Union of Servants of the Primeval Caste. This book appeared in 1968, with commendatory prefaces from the President, Vice-President and other officials of the Republic of India. It illustrates how the previously existing stereotypes, plus nineteenth-century racial theory were inverted, but not rejected by those interested in the 'welfare' of the scheduled tribes. To begin with, being far from civilisation was glossed as being close to nature: 'As correctly portrayed, the tribals are the children of the jungles, they are the flowers of the forest.' Equally, what had formerly been viewed as savage bellicosity could now be read as patriotic zeal:

Though cruelly and unjustly driven into these unwholesome, unwelcome mountain fastnesses by ruthless invading hordes superior in numbers as in their brain power, and the tribals' fertile and alluvial lands in the Gangetic [*sic*] valley occupied, yet these millions of militant patriots acted as the sentinels of India's freedom, through ages of unrecorded and perhaps unrecognised history.³⁵

Both condescension and understanding have been taken over from late colonial ethnography, and used to justify a project – that of paternalist uplift, that had also begun under colonialism. Equally, their history is seen as constituted by two events – one which took place thousands of years ago, when they were driven into the forests, and the second in contemporary times, when they were being excluded from them; between these two they dwelt untouched by history. The only missing element is their classification as valuable specimens for the museum of mankind. Nor was the understanding of professional anthropologists very different – Stephen Fuchs for example, published in 1973 the following hypothetical reconstruction of the history of the 'aboriginal tribes':

³³ Topinard, 'L'Anthropologie', p. 290.

³⁴ G. S. Ghurye, *The Aborigines – 'So-Called' – and Their Future* (Pune: Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, 1943), ch. 1.

³⁵ V. Raghaviah, *Nomads* (Secunderabad: Bharateeya Adeemjati Sevak Sangh, 1968), p. 397.

Many of the aboriginal tribes in India were without doubt in ancient times simply food gatherers and primitive hunters. When their hunting and collecting grounds were gradually appropriated by cultivating immigrants coming from distant lands, and in the possession of a superior culture, the food-gathering tribes had to yield to them. Some of the tribes allowed themselves to be subdued and assimilated by the new-comers, others escaped into areas still comparatively free of settlers, and others again retained their nomadic and collecting way of life in defiance of the new situation.³⁶

It appears to have escaped Fuchs that 'in ancient times' everyone's ancestors, not excluding his own, were food-gatherers and hunters; and more seriously, that his formulation, if it is to mean anything at all, assumes that the present-day social divisions of society track primeval racial lines of descent. Professional historians have also subscribed to variants of this model; for example, a widely used text-book declared in 1968 that there had been 'six main races' in India: the Negrito, the proto-Australoid, the Mongoloid, the Mediterranean, the Western Brachycephals, and the Nordic, and even identified the languages of three of these groupings.

The proto-Australoids were the basic element in the Indian population, and their speech was of the Austric linguistic group, a specimen of which survives in the Munda speech of certain primitive tribes. The Mediterranean race is generally associated with Dravidian culture ... The last to come were the Nordic peoples better known as the Aryans.³⁷

D. D. Kosambi, one of the most original of the historians of India, could not completely shake off the hold of these ideas, largely due to his overrating the importance of technological progress in historical causation. Thus he believed that the introduction of a stable agriculture was impossible without the availability of iron, and that such settled populations would experience such dramatic improvements in food availability as to cause their numbers to increase rapidly and marginalise other forms of subsistence.

Thus even such an acute scholar as Kosambi visualised the technical superiority of agriculture as a mode of production leading inevitably to the explosive expansion of agricultural populations, and ending in the subjugation and encapsulation of the pre-agricultural societies, with this in turn, contributing to the emergence of a caste order. The unsubdued hunter-gatherers were thrust into the forests and their descendants are the 'tribals' of twentieth-century India: 'Munda, Oraon, Bhil, Todas, Kadar ... What has fossilized them is refusal of each tiny splinter to take

³⁶ S. Fuchs, *The Aboriginal Tribes of India* (Bombay: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 45–6.

³⁷ Romila Thapar, *A History of India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), I, pp. 26–7. Thapar no longer holds these views – see Romila Thapar (ed.), *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1993), p. 80.

to regular food production, to acknowledge and utilize the productive systems of encircling society.³⁸ This inexplicable 'refusal' is evidently seen as a voluntary act, internally determined, and unrelated to the opportunities and alternatives offered by the dominant agrarian order. Yet when Kosambi himself carried out a pioneering foray into ethno-history by discussing the Phase Pardhi community near Pune in the context of this hypothesis, he observed that as soon as the Pardhi community in question got access to some land they started growing vegetables, and were even prepared to pay rent to the alleged owner – so it could be argued that they may have been extruded from the agricultural economy and not intruded into it.³⁹

Since the above-cited passages were written, the new environmental consciousness has also selected the scheduled tribes to be its precursors, and endowed them with a mystical closeness to and knowledge of nature. Pereira and Seabrook write of the Varli of west Maharashtra that they 'survived for millennia in harmony with their environment and without oppressing others'.⁴⁰ Again, the widely read *Citizen's Report on the Environment* claimed that it is only recently that landlessness and joblessness have caused 'even groups like the tribals who from time immemorial have lived in total harmony with forests . . . [to turn] against forests and want to sell them off as fast as they can'.⁴¹ We see again the picture of a timeless harmony with nature disturbed only in very recent times by the intrusive forces of the State and the market.

Social segments or living fossils?

Such ideas have been sharply criticised in recent times in other parts of the world by both archaeologists and anthropologists. In fact, it has been vigorously argued that the survival of foragers in tropical rain forests depended on the presence of cultivators from whom supplementary nutrients could be procured; and that 'humans have never lived, and could not have lived in tropical rain forest independently of cultivated foods . . .'.⁴² Conclusive evidence on human populations and subsistence strategies in pre-agricultural times has obviously been

³⁸ D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay: Popular, 1956), pp. 20–31; citation from pp. 24–5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–8, 31.

⁴⁰ W. Pereira and J. Seabrook, *Asking the Earth* (London: Earthscan, 1990), p. 33.

⁴¹ *The State of India's Environment 1984–85 – The Second Citizen's Report*, p. 376.

⁴² R. C. Bailey and T. N. Headland, 'The Tropical Rain Forest: Is It a Productive Environment for Human Foragers?', *Human Ecology*, 19, 2 (1991), 261. The whole issue of *Human Ecology* is devoted to this controversy, and a lengthy bibliography of relevant work is appended to the paper cited.

difficult to find, but the notion that foraging peoples (even in areas like interior Amazonia) began interacting with cultivators in very recent times has been largely abandoned.

In Africa, the San peoples of the Kalahari have long been cited as neolithic survivals, and studied as such down to the 1970s. However, Edwin Wilmsen has convincingly demonstrated that their excision from history was due to the nineteenth-century European search for specimens of the savage hunting stage. By a brilliant rereading of both literary and archaeological sources, he has shown that the apparent isolation of these peoples at the beginning of the present century, far from being a primeval condition, was a consequence of the immediately preceding collapse of trading networks exporting ivory, ostrich feathers etc. to the Western market. So peoples with a far simpler political organisation and more limited technical repertoire than that of the bulk of the scheduled tribes of India were none the less the product of prolonged interactions with larger regional and continental social systems, and their primitiveness was externally defined and enforced.⁴³ Could it be that South Asia was an exception to historic processes generally, or is it that these questions have rarely been asked of the evidence for this sub-continent?

A historical questioning of the archaeological record

The brutal and dramatic encounter of European and aborigine in the Americas and Australia has perhaps had an excessive influence on the understandings of migration and cultural change in South Asia and elsewhere.⁴⁴ S. A. Gregg has proposed that the first neolithic farmers in Central Europe could have lived in symbiosis with the foragers around them, and that seasonal surpluses could have been exchanged to the

⁴³ Edwin Wilmsen, *Land Filled With Flies: A Political Economy of the Kalahari* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), esp. pp. xii, 127, chs. 1–4; also the papers in Tim Ingold, David Riches, and James Woodburn (eds.), *Hunters and Gatherers I: History, Evolution and Social Change* (Oxford: Berg, 1988).

⁴⁴ K. W. Butzer and L. G. Freeman's Preface to Susan A. Gregg, *Foragers and Farmers* (Chicago University Press, 1988), pp. xv–xvi states that Gordon Childe unconsciously succumbed to this impression, though I have not been able to locate any specific statement to this effect in his writings. However, it clearly underlay the Aryan hypothesis by Charles Grant and Bartle Frere, among others – see the citations in the text, above. The Ethnological Committee of the Central Provinces (1868) saw the tribal people as analogous to a remnant animal population, with the Provinces as a 'thick bit of cover in the middle of open country . . . when the plains all round have been swept by hunters, or cleared by colonists, you are sure to find all the wild animals that have not been exterminated.' Cited in Grant (ed.), *Gazetteer of the Central Provinces*, pp. cv–cvi.

advantage of both communities;⁴⁵ and as we saw, it has been argued that many forest areas of the tropics only became accessible to foragers in relatively recent times because of the possibility of supplementing the yield of wild plant and animal foods with cultivated foods supplied by local agriculturists.

Two leading archaeologists have argued for a similar understanding of prehistoric South Asia. The Allchins write that

in the Indian sub-continent distinct, self-contained social groups, at different levels of cultural and technological development, survived right into this century. They include hunting and collecting tribes, pastoral nomads, shifting cultivators, traditional settled agriculturists, modern 'developed' agriculturists and several levels of modern industrial society, all co-existing and economically interdependent. This provides us with a basic model for past developments.⁴⁶

Uncritically applied, of course, such an approach faces the danger of anachronism, and so we shall briefly review the evidence on the various cultural traits that are said to have conferred a decisive advantage on the hypothetical immigrant (Aryan?) folk who drove the aborigines into cover. Let us first consider agriculture and cattle-rearing. To begin with, there is considerable evidence that the domestication of plants and animals occurred at various sites in the sub-continent and its borders. Thus archaeological sites in the Kaimur hills south-east of Allahabad have yielded evidence of the presence of communities that hunted game and collected wild rice in the eighth millennium BCE, and subsequently introduced domesticated rice and tame animals into their diet by the fifth millennium. At one of these sites there was clear evidence of cattle being penned, and sheep and goats reared. Similarly, the sixth millennium BCE inhabitants of Adamgarh, in the upper Narmada valley, (Hoshangabad district) had apparently domesticated dogs, cattle, buffaloes, sheep, goats and pigs.⁴⁷ It is perhaps significant that the wild ancestor of the Indian *Bos indicus*, *bos primigenius namadicus* was missing from the archaeological record of the Holocene, (with possible survival in a few pockets), though *indicus* was widely found.⁴⁸ This would suggest that it may have been pushed into extinction, hybridised or marginalised, by competition from domesticated and feral varieties of *indicus*, which in turn suggests the ubiquity of human presence and activity.

⁴⁵ Gregg, *Foragers and Farmers*.

⁴⁶ Bridget and Raymond Allchin, *The Rise of Civilization in India and Pakistan* (Cambridge University Press, 1982) p. 62.

⁴⁷ B. K. Thapar, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries in India* (Paris: UNESCO, 1985), pp. 39–41, 51.

⁴⁸ P. K. Thomas and P. P. Joglekar, 'Holocene Faunal Studies in India', *Man and Environment*, 19, 2 (1994), 188.

Turning from animals to plants, the sixth–fifth millennium BCE also saw local strains of wheat and barley, as well as the cotton plant being cultivated at Mehrgarh in Baluchistan.⁴⁹ Rather later, third–second millennium, farming spread in Malwa and the western Deccan. Dhavalikar remarks of Maharashtra that it witnessed

an inordinately prolonged mesolithic phase from about 10000 B.C. to 2000 B.C. when the technique of food production was introduced. The region, at least the Godavari and the Bhima valleys, was dotted with numerous encampments of mesolithic hunter-gatherers. In the beginning, during the Savalda (Circa 2000–1800 B.C.) and the late Harappan times, these early farmers do not seem to have converted any of the hunter-gatherers into food producers . . . Later, the hunter-gatherers seem to be shedding their aversion to the food-producing technology if the number of their habitations is any indication. They were however quite successful in the Godavari and Pravara valley, but not in the Bhima valley. All this evidence enables us to visualise a situation at least in the Bhima valley, where the entire region was occupied by hunter-gatherers of the mesolithic complex, and that too quite heavily, whereas in between there were permanent settlements of the early farming societies, forming sort of islands of luxury, with their inhabitants enjoying sedentary life of leisure with an assured and bountiful food supply all the year around.⁵⁰

This situation of abundance, if it existed, may have been temporary: the archaeological evidence does not support the consistent superiority of farming as a subsistence strategy in much of India for some millennia after its appearance, and the great agricultural civilisation of the Indus Valley ultimately collapsed and disappeared, leaving the plains of west Punjab and Sindh depopulated for a millennium or more.⁵¹ At the same time, farming villages continued to exist elsewhere in India, but the populations of the largest of them never seem to have approached the sizes of the defunct Harappan cities. Clearly, they also lacked the explosive growth and striking technological and economic advantage over pastoral and foraging people that historians such as Kosambi presumed them to have. In fact, the Jorwe people studied by Dhavaliker gradually began incorporating wild animals and collected seeds in their diet as their agriculture failed in the face of increasing aridity, and then finally gave up agriculture, taking perhaps to cattle rearing or foraging.⁵² But as agriculture was abandoned at Jorwe, it was established at various locations in Vidarbha, where the builders of megalithic burial circles used a wide range of plants.⁵³ It is also at the sites of these people in the south-central peninsula that the earliest evidence for the use of iron in

⁴⁹ Allchin and Allchin, *The Rise of Civilization*, p. 109.

⁵⁰ M. K. Dhavalikar, *First Farmers of the Deccan* (Pune: Ravish, 1988), p. 7f.

⁵¹ W. A. Fairservis, *The Roots of Ancient India* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), p. 398.

⁵² Dhavaliker, *First Farmers*, pp. 34–5.

⁵³ M. D. Kajale, 'Archaeobotanical Investigations on Megalithic Bhagamohari and its

south India is to be found, more or less simultaneously with its appearance in north India, or about the end of the second millennium BCE.

Contemporaneous chalcolithic villagers in central India were already establishing a pattern of seasonal migration to rock shelters in the hills of Malwa in this period (ending 800 BCE) – shortly after this there was an association of red ware and iron, characteristic of the megalithic culture of the peninsula at these sites, suggesting movements from south to north. The meat the sojourners consumed was almost exclusively that of domesticated animals, suggesting either that they levied tribute on the herds of nearby agriculturists, or that they were themselves graziers sent out by the villages to take advantage of seasonal fodder resources; or indeed that both these strategies were followed by successive users of the rock-shelters. Interestingly, there was evidence (in the form of slag) of local smelting and iron-working so that the itinerants of the forest had access to state-of-the-art military technology.⁵⁴ Kosambi's argument that the centralised state of Magadha rose because of its monopoly of the iron sources of south Bihar ignores the widespread availability of iron ore for small-scale local production all over India, with the exception of alluvial valleys. Indeed, by about 1000 BCE 'virtually the whole of the sub-continent came to possess a close familiarity with the use of iron'; and Chakrabarti and Lahiri have shown that the metallurgists of the earlier Harappan period were aware of its existence.⁵⁵ It was therefore no monopoly of the hypothetical 'Aryans'.

The archaeological culture usually identified with the Aryans has been the Painted Grey Ware, though as D. K. Chakrabarti has cogently remarked, 'one fails to understand how a class of pottery basically found e[ast] of the Sutlej and a culture having rice, pig, and buffalo among its components can be related to anything coming from the n[orth]-w[est]'.⁵⁶ So if the PGW people, or indeed the inhabitants of the Ganges valley had no monopoly of iron, neither (as we have seen) were they cultivators surrounded by savages ignorant of that valuable art. Quite apart from the defunct Harappan culture and its successors, there were numerous communities throughout India that had successfully

Significance for Ancient Indian Agricultural System', *Man and Environment*, 13 (1989), 87–100.

⁵⁴ J. Jacobson, 'Static Sites and Peripatetic Peoples', in L. L. Leshnik and G. D. Sontheimer (eds.), *Pastoralists and Nomads in South Asia* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975).

⁵⁵ This was pointed out by Dilip K. Chakrabarti and N. Lahiri, 'The Iron Age in India: The Beginning and Consequences', *Puratattva*, 1993–94, 12–13.

⁵⁶ In A. Ghosh (ed.), *An Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology*, 2 vols. (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1989), I, p. 109.

domesticated a wide range of plants and animals a thousand or more years before the beginnings of the PGW at the end of the second millennium BCE: furthermore, many, if not most of these were located, not in what became the core cultural area of the central Gangetic plain, but in hilly peripheral regions that, in nineteenth-century folklore, had been till medieval times the domain of ‘wild tribes’, such as the Kaimur ranges.

So the processes of economic and cultural unification that commenced in the later first millennium incorporated peoples acquainted with agricultural, pastoral and foraging strategies, who may well have switched between these as circumstances rendered expedient. What is suggested, then, is that when the second urbanisation and agrarian settlement in the great river valleys began to elaborate the outlines of a sub-continental political and cultural system during the first millennium CE, the nascent centres of that civilisation were part of an interacting continuum of communities that occupied, thickly or thinly, the whole of South Asia. The differentiation that began to occur was socio-cultural as well as technological, and the communities of the riverain plains, the forest, the savanna, the desert and the high mountains co-evolved in continuous interaction involving both conflict and cooperation over the next two millennia. Each community’s habitat was a resource for it: a resource defined not merely in economic, but in political and cultural terms. The boundaries and aspirations of communities were defined by the presence of other communities, other ways of living – identities generated by contrasts; and one of the most crucial of these contrasts was between the the civilised and their domesticated landscape, and the savages in their wild woods.⁵⁷ George Erdosy has recently suggested a similar model, in which *arya* is to be seen as ‘a cultural, rather than a racial, category . . .’ and one characteristic of a rapidly spreading ideology which diverse ethnic groups came to adopt. However, his suggestion that pottery designs and punch-marked coins marked ethnic boundaries is rather implausible:⁵⁸ the function of money is precisely to cross boundaries, and aspects of the publicly displayed persona such as clothing, adornment and speech, are much better markers of identity than motifs on objects of domestic use. Equally, Erdosy fails to consider

⁵⁷ For an erudite and wide-ranging consideration of these issues within the Sanskrit canon, see F. Zimmerman, *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), chs.1–3. Zimmerman’s speculations about the historical expansion of the ‘Aryans’ are, however, not supported by the archaeological evidence to date.

⁵⁸ George Erdosy, ‘The Prelude to Urbanization’ in F. R. Allchin, *The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 91–7.

the connection between the life-style and the ecological locus of particular communities, both surely crucial elements in ethnogenesis.⁵⁹

Monarchical systems and stratified societies were in place in the central Gangetic plain by the time Graeco-Roman accounts of India came to be written (fourth century BCE onward), and there are suggestions that communities occupying diverse terrains were already integrated into a common political economy. All the classical reports concur in describing the population as made up of hereditary occupational groups, one of which was the nomadic herdsmen and hunters. Arrian's *Indica* stated that the

third caste among the Indians consists of the herdsmen, both shepherds and neatherds [cattle-keepers]; and these neither live in the cities nor in villages, but are nomadic and live on the hills. They too are subject to tribute, and this they pay in cattle. They scour the country in pursuit of fowl and wild beasts.

Strabo, citing Megasthenes, who had been ambassador at the court of Chandragupta Maurya, wrote

The third caste is that of the shepherds and hunters, who alone are permitted to hunt, to breed cattle and to sell or hire out beasts of burden; and in return for freeing the land from wild beasts and seed-picking birds, they receive proportionate allowances of grain from the king, leading as they do, a wandering and tent-dwelling life.

The natural historian Pliny added another occupational group: 'In addition to these classes there is one half-wild, which is constantly engaged in a task of immense labour ... that of hunting and taming elephants.'⁶⁰

It would appear from this evidence that various life-ways were integrated into a complex political economy by the last centuries BCE, and that communities located in specific environmental niches specialised in particular activities. Some may have paid tribute to the kings, others been paid in kind by the villages. Occasionally, there may have been a testing of relationships by raiding and reprisal – a possibility suggested by Asoka's warning to the forest peoples in his dominions:

And the forest folk who live in the dominions of the Beloved of the Gods, even them he entreats and exhorts in regard to their duty. It is hereby explained to them that, in spite of his repentance, the Beloved of the Gods possesses power

⁵⁹ The skeletal remains, incidentally, yield no evidence of a biological basis for differentiation according to K. A. R. Kennedy, 'Have Aryans been Identified in the Prehistoric Skeletal Record from South Asia?', in G. Erdosy (ed.), *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language Culture and Ethnicity* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995).

⁶⁰ Citations in order of appearance are from R. C. Majumdar, *The Classical Accounts of India* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1960), p. 237, 264, 342.

enough to punish them for their crimes, so that they would turn from their evil ways and would not be killed for their crimes.⁶¹

It has already been suggested that different communities formed components in an integrated political economy marked by a specialisation and the attendant simplifications in equipment, mental and physical. Further evidence of the process of integration through differentiation and specialisation is to be found in linguistic evidence cited by H. L. Jain, who ingeniously uses the *Natyashastra* of Bharata to infer the distribution of languages and dialects at the time the work was composed. As cited by Jain, Bharata explains that apart from regional variants of Prakrit

there are the languages used by *Sabaras*, *Abhiras*, *Chandalas*, *Sacharas*, *Dravidas*, *Odras*, and *Vanacharas* which are of an inferior type and are known as *Vibhasha*. The distribution of these languages in a drama according to professions and regions is interesting. Pulkasas, charcoal-makers, hunters, and wood- or grass-sellers use *Panchali* with the sibilants. Those who trade in elephants, horses, goats, camels and the like, and those who dwell in pastoral settlements use the *Sabara* language . . . *Abhiras* speak *Sabari* . . .⁶²

One may infer then, that these occupational-cum-ethnic communities were sufficiently distinct for them to have characteristic ways of speaking, on the one hand, but also sufficiently integrated for an upper-class audience to understand actors using these dialectal variants, on the other. Integration may have been both political – grain-shares, livestock tributes – and economic, via the exchange of meat, wood, grass and other products.

The social differentiation described above had both political and economic aspects – forests, seasonal pastures, cultivated fields all provided resources exploitable by specialists, and the various communities were constituted by their specialisations. However, neither the composition nor the location of a particular community was fixed. Lands were cleared for agriculture – but lands also became covered with jungle; trade routes were opened but routes were also abandoned; cities were founded but cities vanished. The archaeological record at many sites has sterile layers, indicating periods when the location was abandoned before being reoccupied. This was true, for example, of much of western India between the fifth and twelfth centuries CE, as noted by M. S. Mate.⁶³ Similarly, herdsmen settled to till or to tax the tillers, but

⁶¹ D. C. Sircar (ed. and trans.), *Inscriptions of Asoka* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1957), p. 53.

⁶² H. L. Jain, 'Apabhramsha Language and Literature', in *The Age of Imperial Kanauj*, pp. 212–13. Jain dates the text to the early centuries of the Christian era.

⁶³ M. S. Mate, 'The Clay Feet?' *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute*, 49 (1990), 247–9.

cultivators shifted to herding; swidden farmers took to the plough but ploughmen fled into the forests. Certain habitats and habituses persisted through time – but their geographical locations and human occupants were in recurrent flux. The rest of this work will attempt to identify the patterns that persisted through this flux.